

## Safer Things by Veem99

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**Summary:** Set straight after Eleven closes the gate in Season 2, Episode 9. A night of reflection. Involves all major characters and has some MILEVEN scenes. Give it a go ;)

## Safer Things

### Safer Things: After Stranger Things

*Hello all! Here's a little fanfiction I've been working on recently.*

*Please leave reviews with your opinions! (If people enjoy, I'll consider writing follow up chapters)*

*As always, I do not own the show or characters- I'm just a loving fan who enjoys writing stories.*

### **SET STRAIGHT AFTER ELEVEN CLOSES THE GATE IN SEASON 2 EPISODE 9**

#### **MIKE'S POV**

I sat curled up on the back seat, resting my head against the cold glass and tapping my knee frantically. I had begun counting them but the number of taps got too high and fast so I had given in and started counting passing trees instead. We hadn't passed many. Steve was in the driver's seat, driving painfully slow. His reasoning was that through his battered eye he could hardly see, so Dustin was in the front passenger seat giving directions and warning whenever Steve got too close to the curb.

The gate had been closed. I knew it- we all did. Nothing else could have sparked the car light to shine that bright by itself. El had done it, but that didn't guarantee her safety. She could have trapped herself in the upside down, or hurt herself. *What if she'd....* No. I'd lost her once. *It couldn't happen again... could it?* I grew more worried by the second.

"Okay there Buddy," Dustin called "there's another car coming up".

"Where?" Steve questioned, clearly frustrated.

"Behind you" reported Dustin.

Light poured through the back window and I saw Steve squint in the back view mirror before muttering something under his breath about

it being "too bright". The car behind started beeping and quickly overtook, causing Steve to mutter more.

"This is stupid" yelled Lucas next to me in the back, "Just let Max drive". He nodded towards Max who was on the other side of him.

"No way." Steve answered, "She almost wrecked my car!"

"Did not!" Max spat out.

"Er, yeah- you did, and if I find one scratch on the paintwork then..."

The three of them erupted into argument, Max and Lucas vs Steve, with Dustin screeching over the top at Steve to "Calm down" and "focus on the road" as the car rocked around.

"STOP IT" I screamed over them all. They all obeyed. It had been the first time I'd spoken since getting in the car. "Stop shouting at each other and just get us to Will's!". That's where El would be... Hopefully- if she was safe anyway. God, I hope she was.

The car went silent- except from the odd direction from Dustin- and I started thinking about all the things I'd tell El when I was with her again. How much I'd missed her, wished she was here. How I'd even imagined her in places, like outside my house the night she... went. Unless of course that really was her- could it? I'd have to ask her. She seemed a lot more confident speaking than the last time I saw her, but then again she'd been with Hopper. Part of me hated him for keeping her away from me, letting me believe she was really gone, but another part was glad. She was alive and she wasn't alone anymore- he'd given her somewhere to sleep, eat, live- somewhere where for most of the last year she'd been safe. Was she now?

There was the other matter of Will. Was he ok? We had no idea if the mind flyer had left him by the time El had shut the gate. I had faith that Joyce would do everything she could, so it was a question of did she have long enough? I was glad that I didn't go with them. It had been hard to see Will so scared and in pain these last few days. It had been even harder to see him when Will wasn't Will. I don't know if I could've watched all three at once. Dustin's voice pulled me away from my thoughts...

"... and the house is the next turn. Well done Buddy!"

"Please stop calling me that" Steve moaned but I could tell from his voice that he was grateful for Dustin's help. I uncurled my legs and rested my hand on the door ready to burst out as soon as we were on the drive. The lights were on and Jonathan's car was here, meaning Will was back. No sign of Hopper's truck though. *Hold it together Mike, hold it together. She's fine, she's fine, she is fine.*

Nancy was waiting in the porch looking angry as we all slogged towards her.

"Where have you been?" She wailed at Steve "I thought you said you'd look after them here- What happened?"

Steve stepped forward in defence, "Hey, look, they took me okay? I woke up in the car and the kids-"

"What happened to your face?" She interrupted- this time with more concern in her voice.

"Billy turned up looking for.... That one" he gestured to Max who rolled her eyes at Steve. He continued: "Things got out of hand and we sorta... had a fight. I obviously showed him who was boss- but, erm, he got a punch or two in there y'know and... urmm....I erm..." He turned to face us now, "What actually happened?" A moment of silence passed as Lucas, Max, Dustin and I realised that we had left Billy unconscious in the hall.

"Shit." said Lucas before we all pushed past Nancy and burst through the door. She and Steve hurriedly trailed in after us. Billy was no longer passed out on the floor where we'd left him.

"He isn't here. Where is he?" Dustin asked in a hushed tone.

"I don't think I gave him much... he probably woke up and went home. His car isn't here" Max whispered back.

"Who?" Johnathan was behind us, pulling down all of Will's tunnel drawings.

"Is Will okay?" I burst out. I assumed he was from Jonathan's casual

activity, but I had to be sure.

"Yeah. It left. He's in bed, exhausted and in a bit of pain but okay." he confirmed. I sighed a breath of relief. Will was safe. Now I only had El to worry about.

"That was my fault," Nancy guiltily admitted "I kinda stuck a hot poker in him"

"Shit" Lucas mumbled again while Dustin enthusiastically said "Badass!" Steve gave him a look, urging Dustin to backtrack: "I mean, that sounds painful."

I felt bad for my sister. She may be annoying at times but she was clearly upset. She didn't like it when people got hurt, and that seemed to be a lot lately.

"You needed to do it" Jonathan comforted Nancy. "It wouldn't have left". The two of them stared at each other as if they were having a conversation in their heads. It was clear they felt something for each other. The gaze became more prolonged and I could see that Steve was becoming uncomfortable. He knew that they were a better match than he and Nancy had ever been but that didn't mean it didn't hurt him to see them together.

"Ummm," he interrupted. Breaking Nancy and Jonathan's stare. "I'm, er, gonna go get some ice" he swiftly walked away to the kitchen, and I heard the freezer door open.

Dustin followed after him, eager to help his new friend calling "Careful of the Demadog!".

Suddenly it was just me surrounded by couples. How I wished El was here so I wouldn't be alone. How much longer could I wait?  
*Distraction... I need a distraction.*

"I'm gonna go see Will" I huffed as I hurried away.

Behind me, I heard Max ask Jonathan "Can I use the phone? I need to call my Mom and tell her I'm at a sleepover or... something."

I cracked open Will's door and saw Joyce raise her head to look at

me. A faint smile touched her lips before she turned her head back towards Will. I crept inside to see him asleep, back in his own clothes. Joyce was stroking his head.

"How is he?" I whispered.

"Okay, I think. He was pretty shook up but now he's just tired" She said, never lifting her eyes from Will.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry you lost-" I stopped myself. Was it a good time to ring up Bob's violent death?

She looked up at me, understanding what I meant. "I... I will be." She told herself.

A minute or two passed and I found myself wondering if Will would remember everything that happened when he woke up the next day. I hoped he didn't. Who'd want to remember that?

"I'm glad he's back" I whispered.

"Yeah" she agreed. "Have you heard from Hopper yet?"

My body stiffened slightly as my thought's suddenly raced back to Eleven and the gate. *Calm down, Mike. Relax. She's fine.*

"No" I croaked out.

Joyce stood up and rested her hands on my shoulders. She knew how worried I was about El. "Mike, hunny, she'll be okay. Hopper's taking good care of her" Her voice sounded reassuring but her eyes were full of worry and doubt. She sensed I could see and quickly changed the topic of conversation. "What about some food huh? You boys haven't eaten anything in a while and I think I have some soup somewhere. Will won't wake up anytime soon, let me get you something to eat." She was trying to distract herself as well as me. I really shouldn't have brought up Bob.

She guided me out into the hall and into the Kitchen, leaving Will's door open. I knew she would return there as soon as she could. I sat at the kitchen table beside Steve who was holding ice on his face while Dustin raided through Joyce's medical kit to find more band-

aids like the ones he had put on Steve's face earlier. Max was talking to her mother on the phone, it sounded like they were having a hushed argument, Billy's name was mentioned a few times. I could hear Lucas chatting with Jonathan and Nancy around the corner, filling each other in on what had happened where they were these last few hours. It was all background noise to me. I concentrated on Joyce heating up the soup on the stove.

Around 20 minutes passed, mainly filled with conversation between the group on what to do with the dead Demadog in the fridge- not that I'd paid much attention. I sat there twirling my spoon in the bowl of soup in front of me. The others had almost finished theirs but I didn't have much appetite. Joyce had returned to Will's bedside- not really necessary, but I understood why she didn't want to leave him. I grew more frantic by the second. I was sure the others could sense it but they didn't engage with me, I was in a ratty mood and they all knew it was probably best to let me wallow and worry- nothing could be said to calm me.

Suddenly, as if by some miracle, light poured through the front windows and the purr of an engine interrupted the conversation. After a brief second, both the light and the sound cut out.

Hopper's truck.

I stood up, pushing my chair onto the floor as I did so, and started running around the table. Before I could leave the kitchen, Jonathan's hand caught my wrist, preventing me from going any further.

"We don't know who it is" he warned. Joyce then returned, assessed the situation and headed for the door to check. At that point I didn't care about the possible dangers, or who it could be, I just wanted El.

"Let me go!" I squirmed as I attempted to break free from Jonathan's grip. I was aware that Joyce was already at the door and Steve was following her, seeing for himself. It wasn't fair- them not letting me see for myself. Even if the situation was dangerous- after the recent events, I think I'd proven I could take care of myself.

"Hopper!" Joyce sighed relieved, swinging the door open. Jonathan loosened his fingers letting me slide out and make a run for the door.

My heart was beating so fast, I could hardly tell if it was beating at all. As I approached the door I saw Hopper making his way through the doorway. His tall figure ducking under the beam. Then I saw her, cradled in his large arms, face buried in his chest... lifeless. *No*.

"El?" I asked. "El?!" Pleading this time.

Hopper made his way into the room addressing me "Calm down kid, she's ok. Just tired. It really took it out of her". Letting his words sink in, my eyes scanned Eleven. Slow movement informed me that she was breathing- Hopper was telling the truth. I let air enter my lungs again and did my best to slow my heartbeat. She was sleeping, that was all.

"Here," Joyce said, leading copper to the couch and clearing some cushions. I wasn't far behind his trail and the others had now filtered into the room, watching with curious but concerned eyes.

"Did she do it?" Joyce asked as she moved the last cushion.

"Yeah. You should've seen it, she's real amazing." he praised. I felt a smile touch me for the first time in hours. He was right- she was incredible. "Is Will?"

"He's fine," Joyce assured Hopper quickly "we got it out."

Hopper nodded and lowered Eleven down onto the couch as gently as he could. Nevertheless, the movement stirred her and she started to move. I moved around to the end of the couch where her head was, as did the others, circling her. It was now that we could all finally see her face...

A gasp of horror washed through us all. The lower half of El's face was coated in thick blood, that had streamed down from both of her nostrils. Some of it was already dry and brown, and some still looked pretty fresh. In addition to black eye makeup, she also had some blood around her eyes- whether or not this had come directly from her eyes or whether she had rubbed her face at some point spreading the blood, I had no idea. She was so pale and clearly exhausted. I knew that El got tired easily when she pushed her powers too much- I'd witnessed it a few times last year, but I'd never seen her like this.



It scared me.

"Oh my..." Nancy hushed her expression of thought, although we all felt the same.

Despite her ghastly appearance, she was still beautiful, because it was her. I'd missed seeing her face, no matter how blood ridden it may be, and I was so thankful to be seeing it again. I hoped I would get to see it all the time from this point on, although preferably looking happier. I would try my best to make her as happy as I humanly could.

Her eyes started to twitch, as slowly she opened them, before jumping up a little, shocked by the many faces surrounding her. Since I was sat by the arm of the couch, now that she'd jumped up a bit, I was out of her eye line and couldn't see her beautiful big brown eyes.

"Easy kid, you're ok. We're back now" Hopper cooed as he combed his fingers through her hair, pushing a few strands out of her face. "Feeling any better?" She started to tilt her head slightly scanning the faces around her.

"Hey, Sweetheart," Joyce said when El passed her face "We're so proud of you".

Their efforts to calm her didn't work, she continued to scan the room. After a second or two she stopped and addressed Nancy. "Mike?" she mumbled weakly.

Me. It was my name that had escaped her lips. Mine. After all, she had been put through tonight, I was her first thought. Me. My heart grew three sizes.

Not even half a second had passed but everybody's eyes were already locked on me- all except El, who still didn't realise that I sat kneeled against the couch, just inches behind her head.

"I'm here." I choked out, reaching for her hand and grabbing it so tightly that I was almost scared that I would be hurting her. Luckily for me, El was a tough cookie. She turned her head slightly, still not having enough strength to fully lift her head enough to face me. It

was enough though, she could see me and once again I found myself lost in her eyes. I felt mine begin to water and she gave me the best smile she could muster through her daze.

*So beautiful.*

"You're okay" I promised her. And it was a promise. I would make sure that she'd always be okay from this point on. She did her best to nod her head, accepting the fact that now she was safe. The others, impatient, interrupted our reunion.

"I'm so proud of you kid." Hopper soothed. "You're one hell of a gal, y'know that?"

Never letting go of my hand, she turned to Hopper and her fragile smile grew wider. "Thank you" she sighed. I could sense that in the last few months they had spent together, the pair really had become close. If they hadn't already formed a dad-daughter bond yet, then they were well on their way to forming one. An odd little family, but a necessary one... They both needed the comfort.

"You don't need to thank me, kid" he mumbled.

"Yeah, after all, you're the one who closed the gate and saved us all from the mind flayer" Lucas exclaimed, grabbing El's attention.

"Yeah, that was really cool of you" Max complimented. She and El hadn't gotten off to the best of starts earlier- El was hesitant to speak to Max for some reason- I'd have to ask her why later. Nevertheless, Max seemed eager to attempt to be El's friend.

"What was it like?!" Dustin exploded, excited by the subject matter.

"Big" El replied.

"Huge." Hopper elaborated. "I don't know how she did it".

The smile from El's lips faded as she turned to Joyce suddenly realising. "Will? Is he ok?"

"Yes sweetheart, he's fine. He's sleeping in his room. I'm sure he'll be excited to finally meet you properly tomorrow. Let's just focus on

making sure you're ok, huh?" Joyce comforted.

"We should probably start by cleaning her up" Nancy expressed, still bothered by her battered appearance. El, confused, watched everybody's reaction before lifting her other hand- the one that wasn't glued to mine- towards her face. At the realisation of her bloodied complexion she flinched. I gave her hand a little squeeze to calm her.

"Yes, I think you're right," Joyce said standing. "I'll go run the bath. The rest of you kids should probably think about cleaning up and getting some sleep too. Are your parents ok with you all staying here?" She glanced towards me and then at Nancy, Lucas, Max, Dustin and Steve.

Murmurs of "yes" echoed from the group. Of course, my parents hardly knew that I and Nancy were here, together, having just battled dangerous creatures from another world- they thought we were each at friend's houses enjoying innocent sleepovers... Sometimes it was better to just hide the truth- what our parents didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

"Err actually, I should probably go" Steve piped up, attempting his escape from the awkward- Nancy, Steve, Jonathan triangle.

"Are you sure? It's two the morning. We have blankets and-"

Steve interrupted Joyce insisting "No, no it's ok, I'll sleep better in my own bed anyway."

"Steve, you can hardly drive with your face like that. You're vision's all screwed- remember?" Dustin reminded him.

"Thanks, Dustin." Steve said sarcastically, annoyed that Dustin was putting obstacles in his way of escaping. Hopper who up until this point, like myself, had been pretty focused on Eleven, looked up to finally review Steve's face.

"What happened?" He questioned.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter. I can drive just fine" said Steve in a defensive tone. Babbles of giggles and arguments erupted from Max, Lucas and Dustin.

"They don't seem to think so," Hopper said, gesturing his head to the three. He huffed, looked at El and then returned his stare back to Steve. "Grab your things, I'll drive you home."

"I don't need you to I-" Steve argued.

"Just do it." Hopper shut him down. Steve sensed this was one argument he wasn't going to win. He went to the kitchen to grab his coat.

"I'll be back soon" Hopper said to El.

"Promise?" she challenged.

"Promise" he affirmed. He stood up and turned to Joyce. "Will you be ok for a while?"

"Yeah," she insisted. "I'll get her cleaned up. Drive safe."

"Always do" Hopper claimed, and with that, he and Steve left through the door.

Over the sound of Hopper's engine starting, Joyce started planning "Erm, right... Jonathan you and I can sleep in Will's room with him- the boys can sleep in yours- go see if you can find some of yours or Will's pyjamas they can use. The girls can have my room- Nancy there's pyjamas, you, Max and El can wear in the top drawer of the dresser." They all nodded and headed off to their retrospective rooms in search of comfier attire and the best spot to sleep in. All except me- I stayed firm at El's side, refusing to let go of her hand.

"Right..." Joyce continued, looking at El now, "Let's sit you up shall we?" We helped El up to a position where she could see more. As soon as she was comfortable, I scooted up and onto the couch beside her. Joyce seemed to have no problem with this. She understood how much I'd missed her.

"I'll go and run you a bath, ok sweetheart? I'm sure Mike will take care of you in the meantime" she then addressed me "Call me if either of you needs me ok?"

"Thank you" El praised Joyce.

"It's ok. I won't be long". Joyce hurried out of the room, leaving just us two alone on the couch.

El lifted her tired arms and wrapped them around me, encouraging me to do the same, until we were tightly cuddled together like the time she had saved me from falling off the cliff. Water filled my eyes and I struggled to hold back the tears. After a while, I realised El too was crying.

"Are you ok? Does anything hurt?" I whispered. She shook her head 'no' despite having her face buried in my chest. As exhausted as she was, like mine, these were tears of joy, not pain. My heart burst again and I squeezed her even tighter than before.

"I missed you so much El. It's been so hard without you, really." I stuttered in a teary mess.

"I've missed you too, Mike" she echoed.

"I'm so glad you're safe. I was so scared that... I didn't want to lose you again. But you're okay now, you're safe, and I won't ever, ever, let you be in danger again. I swear" I vowed.

"Safe" she agreed.

"Did you really hear all of my calls?" I asked, still in disbelief. All those nights I'd spent gushing to her, unsure if she was even alive but wishing, praying that she was. Had she really heard them?

"All of them. Every night. Your voice kept me... hope" She mumbled lovingly. I lightly giggled at her broken sentence- her vocabulary may have not been perfect yet, but she was.

"Well, I'm here now. You can hear my voice whenever you like" I told her.

"Mmmm" she sniffled. We just sat there enjoying each other's company for a long while until Nancy came in wearing one of Joyce's old green nightdresses. She didn't seem surprised to see us tightly hugged together on the couch. I'd always denied my feelings for El to my sister, but I was well aware that she knew anyway. It was the same with her feelings for Jonathan. It seemed Wheelers weren't very

good at hiding their emotions.

"I'm glad you're ok Eleven" she smiled. "Here are some pyjamas for you- might be a bit big, but they'll do for tonight." She placed down a nightdress similar to her own but a darker shade of green on the arm of the couch. On top of that, she placed some blue pyjamas. "Mike, Jonathan picked out these ones for you- they're Will's. Lucas and Dustin have already grabbed the bed and the sleeping bag but I think there are some blankets in his room somewhere. Max took a sleeping bag and is already asleep on the floor in Joyce's room so it looks like we'll be sharing Joyce's double bed, Eleven... I hope that's ok?" Nancy hadn't really spent much time with Eleven, but she trusted her and liked her. I knew that with given time, Nancy would learn to love El as I did. El nodded and smiled but squeezed me tighter, suggesting that she wasn't willing to move. I felt the same way.

"Thanks, Nancy" I muttered, truly thankful that my sister was doing her best to make El comfortable. They'd get along great- I knew it.

"No problem, goodnight" she replied before leaving the room.

"Nancy is good" El complimented.

"She's alright", I commented, though El was right- my sister was pretty cool sometimes.

It wasn't long before Joyce returned, sleeves rolled up to her elbows and a little splash of water on her top. "The bath's ready, let's get you cleared up huh? I'll help you."

We stood her up. She was a little wobbly on her feet but with Joyce's assist, she was capable. I reluctantly let go of her hand to allow her to leave with Joyce but she turned to me, a small glimmer of betrayal and hurt in her eyes. Maybe she didn't understand that I couldn't go into the bathroom with her- I remember giving her clean clothes in the first day or two of knowing her. She didn't understand the concept of privacy then and had almost changed in front of us all. Or maybe she felt like me and just didn't want to be apart. Either way, I couldn't go with her.

"Joyce will look after you" I explained. "I'll wait here for you"

"Maybe you should get some sleep, Mike" Joyce suggested. I looked at her and immediately Joyce knew that wouldn't be an option for me.

I passed Joyce the nightdress for El. "It's ok, I'll wait" I confirmed, more for El's benefit than Joyce's. Calmed by the idea, El nodded and left with Joyce to the bathroom.

I sat alone, grateful that things were slowly getting back to normal- well not normal exactly, Eleven wasn't your usual teenager, but she was my normal. The normal I liked. Things would be ok now.

While I was alone I took off my clothes and replaced them for Will's clean PJs. My t-shirt was now covered in El's blood after she'd buried her face into my chest. It upset me to see so much of her blood but made me feel special that it was me she'd smothered in it. I hoped Joyce would help me clean it tomorrow... I don't think I'd be able to explain the stain to my mom without giving her a heart attack. I folded up my dirty clothes and sat back down on the couch waiting, staring at the rest of Will's drawings that Jonathan hadn't taken down yet.

I wasn't waiting long, although it was not El's face that greeted me. Hopper quietly slid through the door, back as promised, from taking Steve home.

"Hey kid" he greeted me, taking off his coat and sitting down on the armchair opposite me.

"Hey" I said. It was slightly awkward with Hopper now. After our argument earlier, I'd broken down to him and let out a years worth of bottled up emotion. I felt embarrassed because I'd come across... well, I hadn't been able to hold myself together very well. I knew he felt awful about it too- while he would never regret what he'd done or apologise, he could tell that his strict rules had taken its toll on both me and El. Tonight he saw from me the extent of the price I paid and I saw how bad it made him feel, regret or not. We both felt a little awkward that we'd revealed our truths to each other.

"Is she...?" he trailed off.

"In the bath" I finished for him. "Joyce is helping her."

"And everybody else?" he questioned.

"Asleep" I confirmed.

"But you're not" he challenged.

"No"

He nodded, seeming to expect this.

"You care about her" He phrased it as a statement rather than a question. Never the less I nodded in response, unable to hide my feelings for her.

"She erm, y'know she cares about you too kid." He added, catching my attention. I knew El cared- of course, I did- but she always communicated this through looks, actions... she'd never actually said so much in words, and when she did it was mainly just my name.

"Yeah?" I asked instinctively, urging him to continue.

He shuffled in his chair. "Yeah" he huffed. "She talks about you a lot" He revealed.

"What does she say?" the words flowed out of me, curious.

"Erm... She'd, er, always ask when she could see you again. Never use to ask much about the others, just you pretty much. You made quite the impression." He pursed.

I felt a little of my anger from earlier resurfacing knowing that he'd still denied her seeing me despite her feeling this way. "And what did you say?"

"Soon" he responded bluntly.

"Were you telling her the truth?" I asked. I needed to know this. Although I didn't agree with his reasons, Hopper had claimed he'd kept her hidden, kept her a secret for her safety, but I needed to know if he'd intended on making her secret existence permanent or whether he was planning on eventually letting me see her. Letting me know she was alive.



"Yes. I wouldn't lie to her, kid." He defended himself. "Things just got... Every time I thought it might be safe, something would happen and I didn't want to risk it. Maybe I got a little overprotective, okay? I'm trying my best here." Hopper's feelings flooded out of his mouth. He really did love her like a daughter. "Every time I told her to wait longer she'd get angry or upset... or disappointed. I hated seeing her like that. But I was trying to put her safety first. I reminded myself of that through every argument and tantrum." he looked directly in my eyes now. "She fought for you kid, she really did. It was hard to tell her 'no' sometimes".

I sat dazed. I didn't know what to say. Hopper had given me a larger explanation than I'd expected from him and I slowly let it sink in. *She fought for me*. She'd argued with this tower of a man, begged him to see me- of all people. There was a moment of silence as I contemplated what that meant before Hopper shuffled a bit and cleared his throat.

"But here's the thing, kid." He started "She's been through a lot."

"You don't think I don't know that?!" I interrupted, the last of my anger breaking through.

"Calm it, kid" he warned. He waited until I relaxed and then continued. "I know you know, but Eleven's a... tough kid. She doesn't always show how what she's been through affects her." He straightened up trying to explain "I've been taking care of her for a long time now and she still hasn't told me everything that happened in that place. I've managed to piece together bits myself through research and little things she says here and there, not that there's much. She acts so brave- and she is- bravest kid I know, but she's still left hurting y'know? She sometimes gets nightmares that leave her terrified or she'll appear nervous when watching a chase scene on tv or in a book I read her- and not nervous for the character- *she* seems nervous. Hell, she's just had to deal with finding out her Mama is alive and... *damaged*" This caught me- nobody had mentioned this before. El's mom was alive? He took no notice of my reaction and continued "and... and she's got all this..." he couldn't find the word so instead he started gesturing her powers. Imitating her hand movements. "She's not a normal kid, Mike."

I was shocked. In addition to all of this new information, this was the first time Hopper had addressed me by my name. I let that sink in and responded "I know she's not but... that's what makes her special. I know she's different but I'll look after her. I..." *screw it* "I need her." I whispered. "And she needs me".

"Exactly" he assured, taking me by surprise. Was he actually agreeing with me? "That's what makes me so nervous".

"Huh?" I asked, confused now.

He began slowly, "Now- I realise that what she needs is a normal life- or as close to as she can get- but up until now, it's been quite the opposite. She's been treated like a lab rat. Locked up, never free to bond with kids her own age-"

"And who's fault is that?!" I interrupted, taking my dig.

"Let me finish, kid," he said frustrated. "Anyway my point is, one day you kids walk into her life- or rather, she walks into yours and she becomes attached. Very attached. She looks up to like you're... I dunno, kid. The way she feels about you- it scares me how close you guys got so fast. I'm pretty sure she'd do anything for you- including putting herself in danger, and that can be..." he searched for the words, failing. "She's still a long way from mastering social interaction. It's important for her to build relationships and she just wants to spend all her time with you. I don't know if that's healthy for her." He admitted.

"You seem pretty close, it's not just about me" I reminded him.

"Now that's true- I really do care for her, kid. Which is why I don't want to see her hurt" He responded.

"What are you suggesting?" hurt creeping into my voice.

"I'm just saying... you're both young and sometimes... '*friendships*'... don't last, and if you're her only one well..." he trailed off.

"I'll always be her... '*friend*'!" I argued, "besides she's also got Dustin and Lucas and Will and... I'm sure she'll get to know Max and..."

"Okay well let's say you're right" He changed the subject matter. "Back to what I said earlier- what if she puts herself in danger trying to protect you?"

"She won't need to again- and I wouldn't let her."

"Now kid, if recent events have taught me anything, it's that Hawkins can be unpredictable and dangerous. I hope something like this never happens again, but if it does- if you get put in danger, do you think she's just gonna sit there and watch it happen? Even if you tell her not to save you?" He caught me there.

"I..." I had nothing to respond to that with.

"Look," he said finally "I'm not saying I want you to stay away from her or anything, I'm actually glad that she has you looking out for her. I'm just saying- don't forget that she's not a normal kid ok? And just be careful. Can you do that for me?" he asked. I nodded accepting this and grateful for his blessing to spend my time with her. "Oh," he added "And one more thing- don't *ever* upset her, you understand?" his fatherly protectiveness shining through.

"Yes. I promise I won't" I vowed. I would never do anything to hurt her.

"You're a good kid, Mike" he breathed.

I was happy that we'd had this chat. I felt I understood Hopper a little bit better now and him revealing so many of his thoughts made me feel better about breaking down earlier. At the end of the day we both loved Eleven, and just worried about her. We may have opposing ideas on how to take care of her, but we both wanted her to be safe and happy.

We waited in silence and over time I started to find it hard to fight against my eyelids and stay awake. But I did- for El. A few minutes later Joyce returned.

"Oh, Hop, you're back!" she said as she took a seat on the couch beside me.

"Yeah, you don't mind if I stop the night do you?" he replied.

"Yes, of course, I'll erm, I'll go get you some blankets or something in a minute" she mumbled, leaning her head against the back of the couch and closing her eyes in exhaustion.

My eyes were focused on the doorway Joyce entered through. Surely enough El followed through... except... except it wasn't the El I was expecting.

This El had beautiful chocolate curls that framed her face as if she wore a halo and rosy cheeks that blushed as she saw me. She stood in the doorway clutching the sides of Joyce's oversized green night dress and biting her lip as she waited for my response.

"Hey kid, you're looking better" Hopper muttered, prompting El to look at him.

"Yes." She said before returning her eyes to me.

"Wow El, you look..." *Beautiful! Stunning! Gorgeous!* "I mean I like your hair. It's pretty" I stumbled. She smiled and brushed some curls behind one of her ears.

"Our very own Shirley Temple" Joyce giggled, eyes still shut.

El walked over and squeezed between me and Joyce on the couch before resting her head on my shoulder. I put my arm around her and lifted my hand so I could stroke her head, examining her curls with my fingers. Her hair smelt of flowers now and I breathed her in, thankful for this moment. Even in Heaven though, I was still wary of Hopper watching me through his slim eyes.

"Take long to get the hair gel out, kid?" He asked Eleven.

"Not very long" She breathed, sinking into me. Tiredness was close to claiming her too.

"Good" Hopper smirked. "You never did tell me what inspired your new 'bitchin' look y'know".

I was left a bit confused at his choice of words. *Maybe it was a private joke or something?*

"Tell you tomorrow" She yawned, her head constantly weighing further down into my shoulder.

"Tomorrow" he agreed. "Looking forward to it."

Beside us, Joyce started to snore. It had been so long since she had last slept. Hopper laughed and looked at me "Do you know where she keeps the blankets?"

I nodded "Nancy said there might be some in Jonathan's room."

"Mind getting me some, kid?" he asked.

"Urm..." I did mind. I was happy sitting here with El, cradling her head in my hands as she slowly started to drift. But I knew it was important that I got on with Hopper if I wanted to carry on being with El. I also understood that it might be awkward for Hopper stumbling around in the dark looking for blankets while two young boys slept... so despite the annoyance, it probably was better I go. "Sure."

I slowly lifted El's head away from my shoulder prompting her to give a disappointed frown. I gave her a little wink in an attempt to make her smile. It worked. I got off the couch and headed down the corridor to Jonathan's room.

The door was slightly open but it was too dark to see so I reluctantly switched the light on. Luckily Dustin wasn't disturbed, he was wrapped up in the duvet on Jonathan's bed. Unfortunately, Lucas (who was in my sleeping bag on the floor) was.

"Jeez, Mike!" He whispered, "I was asleep down here!"

"Sorry," I mumbled, scanning the room for the blankets. I couldn't see any- just the one Lucas was using for extra warmth. "Do you know where the other blankets are?"

"Wardrobe. Switch off the light!". He sounded pretty angry that I'd woke him.

"Thanks" I said as I opened the wardrobe and pulled out a stack of blankets. I crept out of the room, flicked the switch and closed the

door, making my way back towards El. A few feet away I started to overhear her and Hopper speaking. I stopped to listen in.

"...But I want to stay with Mike" she said.

"I know you do, kid, but Joyce has sorted you a spot in her bed. You and Mike won't sleep well crushed together on the couch" he argued. I doubted those were the only reasons Hopper didn't want us to be alone in the room but... he surely wouldn't think I would do anything like that with her, would he? We were *way* too young for *that*.

"But we-"

"I said 'no', kid." he shot her down. I felt myself deflate too. I couldn't argue with Hopper but I'd also wanted to stay with El tonight. He huffed and continued. "Look, I know you guys haven't seen each other in a while, I get it. But you'll see him tomorrow and the day after that, and after that okay?"

"And the day after that?" she asked, innocence ringing from everywhere within her voice. I peaked around the corner just enough that I could see their exchange.

"Yeah, sure kid. No more hiding. Not from these guys anyway." He sighed. El got up and walked over to give Hopper a hug. Mid-hug, Hopper caught on to me... "You done spying, kid?" he said to me.

"Oh, erm, sorry" I gulped. "Here are the blankets" I passed the pile to Hopper once he'd let go of El. He stood up and threw the top one over Joyce who was deep asleep on the couch. She murmured slightly and then returned to her slow breathing pattern.

He dumped another blanket on the armchair he'd been sat on and ruffled El's hair with his hand lovingly. "I'll sleep here tonight if you need me," he said to her before giving me the remainder of the blankets. "Time for both you kids to get to sleep. C'mon."

He started guiding us both into the corridor and stopped outside Joyce's room. He slowly creaked open the door and whispered: "Say goodnight, kid" to me harshly, making a point that I would not be allowed to see her again tonight.

I turned towards her, and through the dark tried to look into her elegant eyes before grabbing her shoulders and pulling her into my chest, giving her one final hug. "Good night, El. I'm glad you're safe. I'll see you as soon as I wake up." I whispered in her ear.

"Okay" She whispered back "Day 354"

"Yeah, the best day" I kissed her curly head as our hug broke apart. "Goodnight".

"Goodnight, Mike" she echoed.

She gave Hopper one final hug before entering into the room. Hopper closed the door behind her.

"Don't go in till morning." He warned.

"I swear I won't," I promised, despite how much I wanted to. "Goodnight."

"Good kid." He praised. "See you in the morning" and with that Hopper turned his back on me and returned to his armchair. I felt my way down the dark corridor and to Jonathan's door. Not wanting to wake Lucas again, I crept in and despite the dark found a clear spot on the floor. I had three blankets so I used one as a pillow and used the other two as sheets. It wasn't particularly comfy and I was kinda mad that Lucas was using *my* sleeping bag, but I was too tired to *really* care.

It was finally over. Will was safe. So was El, and even better, I had her back now. I could be with her all the time and teach her how to live a normal, happy life. She deserved it so much. I would give her the world. All that was mine, would be hers. I would make sure of it.

I closed my eyes and let myself fall into the world of dreams where I would no longer search for her. I didn't need to dream anymore, the real world was finally worth living again.

***Thanks for reading! Please leave reviews! Like I said at the start: If people enjoy, I'll consider writing follow up chapters.***